

Message Text

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TAGS: PFOR, LE, SY, JO, XF

SUBJECT: TALK WITH PRIME MINISTER RIFAI -- SYRIAN VISIT
AND LEBANON

1. ON FEBRUARY 28 RIFAI GAVE ME AS PROMISED A FILL IN
ON HIS AND KING'S TALKS WITH ASAD FEBRUARY 27 ON LEBANESE
SITUATION.

2. RIFAI BEGAN BY DESCRIBING KHADDAM'S OWN MOOD AND THE
GENERAL FEELING IN DAMASCUS OF ALL CONCERNED
THAT THE SOONER SYRIA WAS RID OF ITS LEBANESE ROLE
THE MORE THEY WOULD ALL LIKE IT. RIFAI SAID THAT DURING
THECOURSE OF THEIR DISCUSSIONS AND IN SUBSEQUENT PRIVATE
CONVERSATIONS WITH KHADDAM, THE LATTER WAS ADAMANT ABOUT
INSISTING THAT HE WOULD NOT GO BACK TO LEBANON. THE
LEBANESE POLITICLANS WERE HOPELESS. FRANGIEH WAS
IMPOSSIBLE AND HAD TO GO AND THE MOSLEM LEFT AND
PALESTINIANS WERE AS BAD AS THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT.
DURING THE GENERAL MEETING WITH ASAD, KHADDAM
CLAIMED THAT HE COULD WORK OUT A SYRIAN CABINET IN
SIX HOURS IF HE WAS ALLOWED TO GET TOUGH WITH THE
LEBANESE. ASAD TOLD HIM THAT HE DID NOT WANT THE
SYRIANS TO USE THAT KIND OF TACTICS. SYRIA SHOULD NOT
BE SEEN AS SETTING UP CABINETS IN GOVERNMENTS ALL
AROUND IT.

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3. ASAD TOLD THE KING WITH KHADDAM PRESENT THAT KHADDAM WOULD HAVE TO GO BACK TO LEBANON AND WOULD WORK QUIETLY AND DILIGENTLY IN THE EFFORT TO PIECE TOGETHER SOMETHING. ASAD WAS KEENLY AWARE, RIFAI SAID, THAT THE CRUCIAL PERIOD WAS BETWEEN THE PRESENT AND AUGUST OR SEPTEMBER WHEN THE LEBANESE PRESIDENT IS TO BE REPLACED. HE SAID NO SYRIAN HAD ANY GOOD WORD FOR FRANGIEH. HE SPENT HIS DAYS PLAYING BACKGAMMON AND CARDS AND DRINKING ARAK AND WHISKEY. HE REFUSED TO DO ANYTHING SIGNIFICANT IN TRYING TO PUT TOGETHER A

LEBANESE GOVERNMENT. FINALLY THE SYRIANS WERE VERY MUCH DOWN ON PEOPLE THEY OSTENSIBLY WENT IN TO SUPPORT -- THE PALESTINIANS AND THE LEBANESE MOSLEMS. THEY FELT THAT IN TERMS OF THE ABSENCE OF COOPERATION, GENERAL LACK OF PRINCIPLE, AND SELF SERVING APPROACH, ALL OF THESE GROUPS DESERVED TO BE EQUATED WITH THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT FOR WHOM THE SYRIANS HAD DEVELOPED EARLY AN IDEOLOGICAL ANTIPATHY. RIFAI SAYS THE SYRIANS REALLY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO BE ABLE TO DO ABOUT A CABINET, BUT THAT ASAD IS DETERMINED TO CONTINUE TO PLAY HIS PRESENT CAREFUL ROLE IN SPITE OF KHADDAM'S GREAT INTEREST IN OPTING OUT ENTIRELY. ASAD, RIFAI SAID, STILL HOPES TO TRY TO CONTAIN THE SITUATION THROUGH MANIPULATION BY SAIQA AND THE PLA AND AVOID ANY DIRECT INTERVENTION BY SYRIAN MILITARY AS SUCH.

4. ASAD APPARENTLY ALSO REASSURED THE KING THAT HE WAS COMPLETELY AWARE OF THE DANGERS OF INCREASED SYRIAN PARTICIPATION IN LEBANON AND WOULD DO ALL HE COULD TO AVOID PUTTING IN SYRIAN FORCES WHICH HE KNEW WOULD PRECIPITATE A REAL CRISIS. RIFAI SAID FURTHER THAT ASAD WAS STILL KEENLY AWARE OF THE DANGERS WHICH LEBANON PROPOSED IN TERMS OF OPENING A BROADER CONFLICT IN THE AREA AND REPEATED THAT ASAD CLEARLY DID NOT WANT WAR AND WOULD DO ALL THAT HE COULD TO PREVENT IT.

5. I ASKED RIFAI FOR HIS ASSESSMENT OF ASAD'S OBJECTIVES REGARDING THE PALESTINIANS. HE SAID THAT ASAD

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HAD RECOUNTED FOR THEM IN SOME DETAIL HIS RECENT FIVE-HOUR MEETING WITH ARAFAT. APPARENTLY ASAD HAD TREATED ARAFAT HARSHLY IN ORDER TO TRY TO GET HIM TO COOPERATE MORE IN THE LEBANESE SOLUTION. RIFAI NOTED THAT ASAD SEEMS TO HAVE NO GREAT INTEREST IN ARAFAT AND THINKS HE IS A MEDIOCRE CHARACTER AT BEST. FURTHER, RIFAI SAYS, HE DOES NOT BELIEVE SYRIANS ARE SERIOUSLY INTERESTED IN TRYING TO SUBSTITUTE SAIQA AND THE PLA FOR ARAFAT. THE

SYRIANS ARE CONTENT TO LET THE PALESTINIAN ORGANIZATION
REMAIN PRETTY MUCH AS IT IS FOR THE TIME BEING.

6. THE SYRIANS, RIFAI SAYS, UNDERSTAND THAT WHILE THE
EGYPTIANS CLAIM A GREAT NEW AFFINITY WITH AND SUPPORT
FOR THE PLO AND FOR ARAFAT, THIS IS NOT THE CASE. THE
EGYPTIANS CLAIM A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN THEY HAVE BEEN
ABLE TO PRODUCE. EVERYONE IS LYING TO EVERYONE ELSE
SO IT IS VERY HARD TO KNOW WHO REALLY EXERCISES CONTROL
AND INFLUENCE OVER THE PLO AND ITS VARIOUS GROUPS.

7. COMMENT: WHILE RIFAI'S PORTRAYAL OF ASAD IN THIS
AFFAIR IS STRIKINGLY LIKE THAT OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
BOOK PORTRAIT OF GEORGE WASHINGTON, AND JORDAN'S INTEREST
IS IN PLAYING UP THE SYRIANS, WHAT RIFAI SAYS HAS
BEEN CONSISTENT WITH ASAD'S ACTIVITIES THUS FAR AND
JORDANIANS ARE CLEARLY CONVINCED THAT THE SYRIANS
BELIEVE THEY ARE Mired IN TOO DEEPLY IN LEBANON AND
SIMILARLY FEEL THEY HAVE LITTLE CHANCE OF FINDING A
CLEAR WAY OUT, BUT THAT SYRIAN INSTINCTS ARE TO GET
OUT IF THEY CAN. WHILE KHADDAM WOULD LIKE TO QUIT
(RIFAI TELLS ME THAT HE COMPLAINS OF SERIOUS HEALTH
PROBLEMS, ESPECIALLY WITH CIRCULATION IN HIS LEGS),
ASAD IS CLEARLY CONCERNED ABOUT WHERE ALL THIS IS
LEADING SYRIA AND CAUGHT UP IN THE INESCAPABLE CONSEQUENCES
THAT SYRIA IS STILL THE ONLY LIKELY CALMING
INFLUENCE IN THE WHOLE MESS. END COMMENT.
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